

Fighting For a Seat at the Table: Why Women Can Be Formidable in 2016 Elections

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It's a matter of general consensus that Hillary Clinton is at the center of the 2016 presidential buzz and speculation. With near-celebrity status, unmatched qualifications and a brand name to boot, many believe that she's the best candidate for the nation's highest office and the key to the Democratic Party's success in 2016. The PAC Ready for Hillary has already begun to fundraise for a potential campaign, though Clinton hasn't given a confirmation as to whether she will pursue the presidential office. Even though the most affirmative response thus far is that she's "thinking about it," she has a backbone of support within her party.¹ Already, 16 high profile women of the Democratic Party have signed a letter of support to encourage Clinton to run again. Never intended for the public, this secret letter was started by Sen. Barbara Boxer and was revealed to the public when Sen. Hagan of North Carolina accidentally mentioned it at an event.²

Yet, a few of the women who have signed the letter could be Clinton's most serious contenders in the primary if they chose to run, as they should. While Clinton is undoubtedly the most talked-about potential female candidate, she's far from the sole woman in the Democratic Party that could launch a formidable campaign for the Oval Office.

Though no female candidate has confirmed a 2016 presidential bid, a remarkable number of women are considered some of the most viable potential candidates for the Democratic nomination. These women are worth discussing not simply because of their gender, but because they happen to be some of the most legitimate candidates other than Clinton.

However, the aforementioned letter of support stands as the first obstacle to many women partaking in the Democratic primary. This secret sisterhood of support is a mark of progress in some regards, as many of Clinton's female colleagues didn't back the former Secretary of State in 2008. Yet, this step forward pales in comparison to the potential of a Democratic primary arena driven by strong, legitimate female contenders. There's a great deal of hype about Clinton's stature, but she has been in a similar position before. In 2008, there was also much talk of Clinton's inevitability. She was the early — albeit not this early, comparatively — favorite for the nomination until a fresh face presented an alternative. The Democratic Party is trying to put all of its eggs in Clinton's basket, as there's no doubt that any victory for Clinton, either in the primary or general election, would constitute a remarkable milestone in American history. But, an election

with several female contenders, all of whom would have a legitimate shot at securing the party's nomination, would be equally if not more historic. Though there is scarce positive evidence that these women will run, there are many reasons why they should.

A primary dictated by female candidates would be an unprecedented feat that could force society to consider the importance of women's involvement in the political sphere. No one doubts the distinctions among male candidates of a party, yet many assume that every female Democrat is a product of one mold. The electorate unrealistically believes women in politics should be strong, not too feminine and focused on social issues.³ A presidential primary with a multitude of female candidates could mitigate this myopic view. The intricacies of female politicians would be on full display. Their differences, from slight nuances to yawning gaps in ideology, would gain full media coverage, as America's two-party-dominated system allows for multiple distinct views to form within each broad party. A temporary hiatus from a male-favored game would demonstrate the problem caused by the lack of gender parity in politics. Women constitute only 18.5 percent of the 114th Congress. This obviously harms *descriptive* representation,

the extent to which Congress reflects the traits of American society, as this small percentage is not reflective of the proportion of women in the United States. Yet, this is also detrimental to *substantive* representation, representation and advocacy on behalf of the beliefs and views of a certain group, as 99 politicians cannot represent the ideological intricacies of more than half of America's population.⁴

The Democratic Party would also benefit from multiple women participating in the 2016 presidential bid. This monumental step would lend irresistible electricity to the primary that would carry over to the general election. Candidates would experience the normal benefits of a primary, like increased exposure and higher caliber of debates and discussions, as these women are some of the party's most qualified contenders.⁵ Additionally, the varying ideologies of these potential candidates would showcase the nuances across the spectrum of the Democratic ideology. The race could include moderate, populist and centrist campaigns, and would naturally highlight the differences between them.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a Democrat from Massachusetts, has the potential to make a substantial impact in the primary.

The deepening divide in the party on foreign policy and the volatile issue of the power of America's wealthiest creates an ideal environment for a Warren presidential campaign. There's an emerging sector of populist and disaffected voters within the Democratic Party that finds Warren increasingly appealing. Many Democratic voters are becoming more and more aware of social inequality and supportive of regulation, so much so that 30 percent of voters under the age of 30 favor the concept of socialism over capitalism.⁶ The certainty that she would hold big business accountable to populist concerns in the face of speculation that Clinton — a centrist who has experienced financial success in business and found many supporters on Wall Street — might not punish old allies or new friends offering campaign contributions, is one of the main reasons that some consider Warren to be Clinton's potential "worst nightmare."⁷

Warren could stand as a credible opponent who is also a relatively new face in politics. As former Harvard law professor, her sharp intelligence would serve as a strong asset to debates. At her very first Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs hearing, Warren left the room speechless after posing questions that forced some to reconsider their assumptions on

the interworking of the regulatory world. When no one could recall the last time a large financial institution had been brought to court, her concern that “too big to fail has become too big for trial” seemed very plausible.⁸ Yet, this move wasn’t received favorably by some of her colleagues. Warren’s unabashed intellect can make her abrasive, which may not be ideal for a female candidate in a culture that values women whose tenacity doesn’t override the traditional gender stereotype and doesn’t hesitate to aim caustic descriptions at those who deviate from this expectation. But this flaw is key to her success: Her resolve and intelligence command attention and respect, and her presence in the primary would prevent other Democrats from skating over tough issues. To avoid looking insignificant in her wake, her opponents would create informed and structured campaigns to prepare for her pointed questions.

Her focus on economics, which would inevitably be a key component of her platform, taps into the debate at the heart of American politics. With Warren in the running, America would have no choice but to examine the possibility that cracking down on Wall Street is the Hail Mary that could save America’s middle class. Her other economic talking points, such as her advocacy for

credit reform and her stances on social safety net policies, would receive lip service as well.⁹ This election serves as a prime political opportunity for Warren. It’s her chance to promote her populist ideology to a friendly audience and a way to further her education agenda. Warren has the opportunity to champion her belief that investment in education is synonymous with investment in the future. She believes in decreasing the difficulties of getting a post-high school education, and therefore supports increased funding for public universities, strengthening the grant program, and refinancing loans at a lower interest rate.¹⁰

Her standard response to questions of a presidential bid has evolved from an emphatic stance — “I am not running” — to an expression of uncertainty that invites speculation. In a recent interview, Warren said she was unsure of what lies ahead when asked about her presidential prospects, as “there are amazing doors that could open.”¹¹ While remaining in the Senate would allow her to continue her direct influence in the sphere of policy, in reality her influence is limited by her position as a Democrat in a Republican controlled senate and her status as only the second-most junior member of the Banking Committee.¹² Meanwhile, her candidacy would force

conversation on otherwise avoided issues, both among other candidates and the public. A presidential campaign would bring a new level of visibility to these difficult topics. Her supporters want to see Warren run for the good of her career or populist beliefs, but she should also consider running for the good of her party.¹³ The rise of populist sentiment among Americans is a natural and common response to a struggling economy, and the Democratic Party has seen this sentiment gather political force as it faces increasing pressure from liberals to take a more populist stance on a variety of issues, such as minimum wages and social safety nets.^{14,15} To remain strong, the Democratic Party cannot ignore its populist sector. Their views must be addressed, and Elizabeth Warren should be the one to address them.

Amy Klobuchar is another Democratic woman who could potentially run a formidable 2016 campaign. As a popular two-term Minnesota senior Senator, her candidacy would set a precedent for moderate liberal women in the presidential ring. Renowned for her dedication to the middle class and work to make economic opportunity a reality for all Americans, Klobuchar has the potential to be a well-liked, relatively moderate candidate who appeals to the strong faction of

moderate Democratic Americans. Moderate appeal is still important despite the rise of populism, as the party's shift towards the left does not mean that populists are the Democrats' most powerful voices.¹⁶ Her economic focus is easy to swallow, as she emphasizes the importance of innovation, particularly through homegrown energy and the modernization of the American patent system, and common sense tax reform.¹⁷

Similar to her female colleagues, Klobuchar has made no verbal indication that she wishes to pursue a 2016 presidential campaign, but her plans to keynote the Democratic Party's annual Jefferson-Jackson Day this upcoming year has led many to wonder if she's looking to spread her influence outside of the Midwest.¹⁸ Though she is one of the most popular politicians in the Senate and her influence is prevalent in the political sphere as a name that has been mentioned for the next U.S. Attorney General and in similar past discussions regarding the Supreme Court, she has little recognition among the public.^{19,20,21} Many view her lack of widespread public recognition as an obstacle that could deter her from entering the race.

However, this obstacle is why it is important for Klobuchar to run. If she enters the race, she will

illustrate that a strong political experience is the only requirement for a woman to run for president. Men previously largely unknown to the public frequently run presidential campaigns, but the same can't be said for women. Women are far more likely to doubt their political success than men, and as a result it is often only the female superstar politicians who enter the race.²² Though Klobuchar is not the strongest potential candidate, she is one of the most important. While name recognition is an influential and inevitable aspect of any campaign, it should not be an initial necessity for women. It's not the deciding factor of a campaign, but a problem that can be addressed through effective campaigning and a sound and innovative platform. Her presence would demonstrate that a candidate's credentials, regardless of gender, should be the primary factor considered when a politician is debating entering a campaign.

Kirsten Gillibrand is another name that has garnered much attention as a potential candidate. In 2008, she was a largely unknown member of the House when New York's governor appointed her over several senior members of the party to fill Clinton's then-vacant Senate seat. Despite the initial upset that ensued, Gillibrand has evolved into a key Democrat in the Senate.

She has since kept her Senate seat in landslide electoral victories, winning with 63 percent of the vote in 2010 and 72 percent of the vote two years later.²³

Gillibrand has made a name for herself in the Senate through her advocacy of women's rights. Though her proposed legislation to combat sexual assault in the armed forces by limiting the military's involvement in these cases was defeated by a Senate filibuster, her yearlong struggle earned her respect among her peers and a reputation as a fighter. After the defeat, she simply directed her efforts towards legislation that aims to curb sexual abuse on college campuses.²⁴

This demonstrates precisely why Gillibrand should run for office: she would be good at it. Her focus is progress, not politics. Her interests are not solely concentrated in social issues, as the creation of more jobs is her "number one priority." Her holistic economic policy advocates not only for an increase in the minimum wage, but for tax cuts for small businesses and an overhaul of the dairy pricing system to aid America's rural economy.²⁵ Her dedication to change, which stems from tactics that include lobbying any and every available colleague and cornering the Senate's newer members, would be appealing to a public that has watched Obama

struggle to execute his goals. After a defeat, she regrouped and adjusted her angle. Claire McCaskill, a fellow Democratic Senator who opposed Gillibrand's military sexual assault legislation, told colleagues, "If you are going to oppose Kirsten Gillibrand, you need to pack your lunch, because you won't have time to go out."²⁶ This is a fearlessness that the public should expect of its officials. Her primary campaign would force other candidates to measure up to her level of dedication. Yet Gillibrand is now working with McCaskill to fight against sexual assaults on college campuses. She is known for her willingness to cooperate, even bridging the partisan gap in an era when many view reaching across the aisle as the equivalent of travelling through a minefield. Last year, Gillibrand was a key contributor to a bipartisan anti-gun trafficking bill that combined Republican and Democratic elements. Her legislative project to combat sexual assault in the military had backing from far right Republicans such as Ted Cruz and Rand Paul.^{27,28} Her respectful yet persistent manner, command of the facts and openness to discussion established her as a Democrat they were willing to work with. Her participation in the Democratic primary would bring the importance of bipartisanship to the forefront, a discussion that

would benefit both political parties. Recognition that bipartisan cooperation isn't a thing of the past would constitute as a significant step towards a better political future.

Most importantly, Gillibrand should run for her own political ambitions. Few doubt that she has them. Though no one would accuse Gillibrand of pandering her private life to please the public, she happens to fit well into society's expectations of what a female politician "should" be, as a woman renowned as a fighter who still prioritizes home life over her work. Her recently penned memoir has garnered much talk, as many memoirs do. Gillibrand claims it isn't a stepping-stone for a presidential campaign, and even if this is true, it still is a strategic way to increase her name recognition.²⁹ She doesn't shy from the spotlight, stepping forward on the rampant sexist comments she has experienced in the Senate.³⁰ This is by no means a selfish act, as it promotes awareness of women's rights and puts her in a vulnerable position. But her courage to step forward distinguishes her, yet again, as a key figure in the discussion of gender equality. The 2016 Democratic primary presents Gillibrand with an opportunity to practice what she preaches. If she runs, she will demonstrate that

gender equality truly is worth the fight.

Like all of these potential candidates, Gillibrand believes that America is ready for a woman president. Yet, she doggedly believes that this woman isn't she — at least not this season. In this belief lies the core issue that is hinted at in the letter of support for Clinton: While it's admirable that these women want to support the supposed best among their ranks, Clinton, their shared goal, to elect a woman to the White House, will be best achieved by replacing old strategies with new ones. The country has already seen that American politics can handle one woman among many men in the presidential race, as Clinton was a serious contender in 2008. 2016 is the time to demonstrate that American politics are ready for many women to compete in the presidential race.

The practice of gender parity will signify its importance. Gender equality is necessary for a complete representative democracy. More women in politics would increase the descriptive representation within the United States government, with more women represented by individuals that they identify with on a contextual level, and, more importantly, the substantive representation of the American government. Though no issues are

pertinent to only one gender, topics generally important to American women would more likely be addressed, as female politicians are more often policy entrepreneurs in these areas than their male counterparts.³¹ When more than half of the public is underrepresented, the government cannot truly form policies that represent the interests of the entire country.

If Clinton chooses to run in 2016 and is the only woman to do so, she still has the potential to make history. Yet, she will be shouldering an immense burden. If there's only one female candidate, she will be expected to represent all American women. The voting public will likely attempt to transmit its many views and expectations of

women onto Clinton alone, and expect her to agree. This is an impossible feat that will only hurt Clinton, as she will be stretched and pulled in numerous directions until her stances become a little too thin. If all of these women share the responsibility of representing the United States' female population, the candidates will be able to stand firmly and deeply for what they believe by representing the diversity among American women.

On the other hand, if Clinton chooses to run and her women colleagues follow suit, Clinton remains the clear front-runner. But even though these women don't have guaranteed electoral victory, a primary with a multitude of strong female

candidates is a victory in its own right. Not only would it benefit the party to showcase its strongest contenders, but also it would benefit women's political progress. Alongside the variety of topics aforementioned that these women would champion in their campaigns, questions on issues such as reproductive rights or equal pay would be unavoidable. Presidential debates between female candidates would serve as an unprecedented platform to illustrate the complexity and importance of these topics to the public. This is imperative because men, often ignorant to the effects these issues have on women, typically dominate the discussion of these topics. To stand with Clinton, women need to run against her.

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